

Exceeding Righteousness: Oaths & Integrity

Matthew 5, starting in verse 33. Again, you have heard that it was said to those of old, you shall not swear falsely, but shall perform to the Lord what you have sworn. But I say to you, do not take an oath at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, or by the earth, for it is his footstool, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great king.

And do not take an oath by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black. Let what you say be simply yes or no. Anything more than this comes from evil.

Let's pray together. Father, we thank you for your word. We thank you that your word is true.

Lord, we thank you that, God, when you speak, Lord, we hear all that pertains to reality, all that pertains to truth. Lord Jesus, we believe that you are the word of God, and therefore the faithful and true witness. And so we pray that it would be from your word, by your mouth, by your spirit, that we would receive your word today.

Lord, give us faith to believe. Lord, give us courage to bring our lives in obedience to your word. And Jesus, be exalted in all that we say and do today.

Lord, would you not only be present, but God, would we know that you are true, that you are alive, you are real. Lord, we love you. We want to hear from you.

So teach us in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen.

You may be seated. Well, I will never forget the night that I told the truth, and the truth did not matter. Told the truth, and I was not believed.

I can't tell you how old I was, but I know it was Christmas Eve. It was Christmas Eve, and the whole extended family was over at our house. It was a kid, so aunts and uncles over at our house for a Christmas Eve meal.

And it was getting toward the end of the night, and everyone was having a good time. And my mom just thought, we got to get everyone together for a photo, right? And if you know me, you know I hate staged photos, and I have for a long time. Maybe this is why.

I don't know. Time will tell. Maybe therapy.

But we all gathered in front of the tree. Everyone, you know, smiles on their faces. And then my older brother right behind me, just jabbing me in the ribs with his finger over and over and over again.

At first, I tried to like get him to stop, and he didn't. And so I lost it. I turned around, and I elbowed him right in the stomach.

And my parents did not see my brother's instigation, but they certainly saw my retaliation. And

so I was sent to my room. And for the next hour or so, my dad made multiple visits to my room, trying to get the truth out of me.

And I did not lie about elbowing my brother, but he was convinced I started it. I did not start it. I said, Dad, I didn't start it.

I swear he was poking me. He was instigating, and my dad didn't believe me. And so I had to like escalate my words.

Dad, I swear to God, it wasn't me. Nothing. Didn't believe me at all.

He saw what he saw. Nothing was going to change his mind about it. There's almost nothing more makes you feel helpless or powerless than telling the truth, not being believed, being called a liar.

And eventually, I just confessed to something I didn't do. Because there was no way he was going to believe me otherwise. And so I said that I did it, and I took what was coming.

And it was the only way through, was actually to lie in order to make them believe that I was being truthful. And as difficult as that was, the harsher reality, the bigger problem that I have come to learn over time, as I, you know, have reflected on that moment quite a bit throughout my life, is that the reason he didn't believe me was because I'd trained him not to believe me. See, I'd lied before a number of times, and been caught for it.

I had multiple times insisted on my innocence, all the while knowing that I was guilty. I'd manipulated the story, I had told the half-truths. And so finally, when it actually mattered, my words in that moment carried absolutely no weight.

And this is the universal human problem that Jesus is speaking into in our text. See, most of us, if not every single one of us, at some point in our lives, has chipped away at our own credibility. Not always with bold-faced lies, but with half-truths, and exaggerations, and selective storytelling.

Telling this side, but not that side. Carefully curating how we appear with our words, with our social media engagement. And when the truth finally matters, what happens when our words don't carry the weight, or the authority, the trustworthiness that we need them to? See, this is actually why oaths exist to begin with.

Oaths exist because trust does not. And this fracture begins all the way back in the Garden of Eden. The first collapse of humanity doesn't begin with some radical violence.

It begins with distorted words. The serpent crept into the garden, and when humanity was meant to live in imperfect trust of God, knowing that God was good, and that He was provide the good, and protect them from what was evil, all of creation hinged upon this fact that we could trust God. And the serpent whispers into that world, did God really say not to eat the fruit

from any tree in the garden? He doesn't outright deny God.

He doesn't say God doesn't exist, or God is evil, or God is lying to you, or any of that. He just suggests that God's command is hiding God's true intentions. He whispers that God's holding out on you.

God doesn't want for you what is good. And He introduces suspicion into humanity's relationship with God. And the moment Adam and Eve begin to entertain that idea, and take the fruit from the tree of knowledge of good and evil, and eat the fruit, something shifts in the heart of humanity.

Their eyes are open. They knew that they were naked. They were now exposed and vulnerable.

And this vulnerability causes them to hide, not only from one another, but from God. And then God comes looking. If you remember the story, Adam, where are you? And they're hidden.

They've hidden themselves behind leaves, and they've hidden among the trees of the garden. And when Adam and Eve are found out, what do they do? They don't confess. They're like, God, I'm sorry we did it.

They hide again. They shift blame. Adam goes, the woman that you made, she gave me the fruit and I ate.

Not only blaming the woman, but blaming God. God, you made something defective and she led me into this. It's not my fault.

It's the woman that you gave me. It's her fault. God turns his attention to the woman and the woman says, the serpent.

The serpent deceived me. It was his fault. He's the one that you should be talking to.

Notice carefully, they don't lie. They're not like, God, we didn't eat it. We didn't do it.

You got the wrong people. They don't necessarily lie. They don't deny what they did, but they manage perception.

They curate their story in order to minimize the appearance of their guilt and preserve themselves. And that tendency has never left us ever since. That tendency to manage perceptions, to manipulate the truth, to be able to actually use the truth in order to tell a lie.

It's never left us. We lie to avoid consequences. We exaggerate in order to garner admiration.

And we withhold information to protect our image and control outcomes. This is a universal human temptation. And once that trust in one another is fractured, society cannot function without some mechanism for managing trust.

That's where oaths come in. Oaths raise the stakes of dishonesty. An oath is an appeal to a

higher authority, calling that higher authority into account to give our words credibility.

But it's not just calling God or some larger authority as our witness. It's actually placing ourselves under the judgment of that authority if we are lying. Think about when we say, I swear to God.

When we swear an oath before God, we're not just saying, as God is my witness. We're saying, if I'm lying, may God judge me. God is my judge if I am not telling the truth.

And so the oath doesn't make the words true. The oath just raises the consequences for violating it. Think of another example, like in a courtroom.

Casual lies might get you in trouble relationally, but perjury, lying under oath, will land you in prison. And so we swear the oath to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, so help you God, so that those listening to our testimony know that we know the consequences for lying, and then we'll be more inclined to tell the truth. So originally, oaths were meant to reinforce truthfulness.

They were a way of saying that we understand the seriousness of our words, and we understand the consequences if our words don't accurately reflect reality. And so oaths in the ancient world were a normal part of life, and were necessary in pursuing justice in a world where lying is possible. Lying was not possible.

We wouldn't need to swear oaths, but because there's always the temptation to fabricate the details of whatever story we're telling, oaths are a way of getting at the truth. And even in the Old Testament, oath-taking was not regarded as a problem. It was false oath-taking.

Leviticus 19.12 is one of the texts that Jesus is summarizing here when he says that you have heard that it was said to those of old. And Leviticus 19.12 says, you shall not swear by my name falsely, and so profane the name of your God. I am the Lord.

God is not forbidding oaths. He's forbidding false oaths. He's forbidding taking oaths that we don't intend to or are unable to be faithful to.

But here's the problem. Okay, I hope you're tracking with me why oaths exist and how we're getting to this point. But the problem is when oaths are required in order for people to trust you, the damage is already done.

If you need an oath in order for people to believe your words, the damage of your words has already been done. When oaths become normal, the implication is that my everyday words are not enough. When oaths become expected or required, it's because our everyday words are not trusted.

And once that happens, we find ourselves operating in these tiers of truth, right? There are our casual words about casual things, and they can be believed casually. But when we talk about

more serious matters, we need to use more serious words. And when we are speaking of things maybe in a courtroom setting, there are binding words, words that are under oath.

And so we've got these categories, these tiers of truth, where more is expected of us when we are sworn to give the details than is expected of us when we're just speaking. And that reality, that kind of society, the fact that that exists indicates, again, just the problem that human beings don't tell the truth, that we manipulate. When everyday speech is negotiable, then sworn speech becomes mandatory, and slowly honesty and truthfulness becomes compartmentalized, and we begin living in two worlds, a world of ordinary speech and a world of serious speech or sworn speech.

And rather than protecting truth, the existence of oaths actually creates opportunity for dishonesty. And so in Jesus' day, this oath-telling culture became a sophisticated system of loopholes. Leviticus 19, which we just read, warns against swearing by God's name falsely.

So instead of telling the truth, people just stopped swearing by God's name. So it says, don't swear falsely by my name. And so what people began to do is just, well, we just won't use God's name.

And then we'll swear, and even when we're lying, we won't be held accountable because we didn't swear by God's name. So it's all good. And so once these people would use placeholder words, instead of using God's name, they would use things like, I swear by heaven, right? I'm not using God's name, I'm just swearing by where God lives.

That's different. And so this whole ranked system of words began to be used, and the rabbis would have lengthy conversations in the mishnah, the oral tradition of interpreting God's law. They would have these lengthy conversations about which words were closer to God's name than other words.

And the closer a word was to God's name, not in sounding like it, but in like his reputation or his character, his identity, a word that got closer to the character of God, that was more legally binding than other words. So if you swear by the Lord, absolutely binding. You must perform your oath if you swear by the Lord.

But if you swear by heaven, well, still pretty binding, but not as binding as swearing by the Lord. Swear by the earth, that's less binding. Swear by Jerusalem, it depends.

The rabbis say that swearing by Jerusalem was less binding, but if you swear toward Jerusalem, that was more binding. Why? I don't know. Couldn't tell you, but it was different for them.

Swearing by your own head, right? Like if I'm lying, may I die? Well, it's not like swearing by heaven, but that's still pretty severe because you're risking execution if you are not telling the truth. Entire discussions were devoted to these various loopholes. And so some oaths carried divine weight.

Some allowed for like escape routes. And so people could sound reverent without being honest. They could appear serious all the while not being serious.

It was the religious version of making a promise with your fingers crossed behind your back. It was ridiculous. The very system that was designed to protect the truth was being used as a way of sanctioning dishonesty.

And so here's the crucial point. When a system designed to protect the truth becomes a system for manipulating the truth, Jesus doesn't just step in and tweak it. He blows the whole thing up.

He was like, this whole thing of oath telling, done. Like gone. Don't do this anymore.

He completely blows it up. He's not interested in negotiating on truth. Rather, he is forming a people of radical integrity.

He's creating a kingdom of radical integrity. Listen carefully. Jesus doesn't say, but I say unto you, just be really careful when you make oaths.

He doesn't say, you know, swear more sincerely. He says, don't take an oath at all. My disciples, those who want to follow me, Jesus says, you don't take oaths at all.

No oaths. None. No more.

Okay. You're not going to swear at all. No oaths.

He says, by heaven, that's God's throne. That's where he lives. By earth, that's where he rests his feet.

By Jerusalem, that is God's city. And even your head, you're not even sovereign over whether your hair is black or gray. God is.

Do not swear by anything because there is nothing that you can swear by that God is not sovereign over. So just don't do it. All of the things that people were accustomed to swearing by in order to avoid God's name, Jesus says, you cannot swear and avoid God's name.

You cannot swear and avoid God's accountability. And so by doing this, by abolishing oaths among his people, Jesus is placing his people under perpetual accountability. He's saying from now on, you don't need to swear oaths because everything you say must be true and trustworthy.

Your yes must be yes and your no must be no. Every word you utter is spoken under God. Do not take an oath at all.

That's a hard word. And it almost feels unrealistic. How do you operate in this world without swearing oaths? What is the perception of a person who takes the witness stand and they say, do you swear to tell the truth, the whole truth, nothing but the truth to help you God? No.

The perception is you plan to lie. Someone in our world who refuses to take oaths is immediately understood as someone who wants to be dishonest. They're going to manipulate the truth.

And so how is it even possible to live in a world where oaths are expected? Even take it out of the court system. What about politics and the oath of office? Can a Christian never serve in political office? Jesus says, take no oaths at all. Or doctors and nurses.

I know we have people who serve in the medical field. The Hippocratic oath, swearing to do no harm. We have law enforcement officers in here who have sworn to serve and protect.

I'm not bringing this up to shame anyone at all. I'm just saying, how do we do this? How do we obey Jesus' words when these are expected of us? What about contracts, promissory notes? What about wedding vows? No oaths at all. Many Christians, many theologians have gone to great lengths to try to explain how Jesus' words at all doesn't mean at all.

People have honestly, they've gone, well, there's a difference between oath taking and oath making. If someone places an oath upon you, like the state wrote it for the courts or for law enforcement or the oath of office, if the state wrote it, they made it, you didn't make it, but you can take it. You can say, I do.

But you can't make your own oaths as a way of garnering trust for personal matters. I don't know what Jesus says at all. Don't take oaths at all.

Or people have said, no, you can swear to tell the truth about past events, right? Because those have already happened and you have control over whether or not you accurately testify concerning those past events, but you cannot take oaths to assure someone of future decisions or actions that you're going to take. Because ultimately you're not sovereign over that. God is sovereign over your life.

So you can swear to tell the truth about things that happened in the past, but you can't swear to do something in the future. Or it's okay to take an oath that the state imposes on you. So do not take oaths at all unless the state makes you.

That doesn't sound like Jesus. Jesus says don't take oaths at all. And you see what we're doing here.

We're doing the exact thing that Jesus is confronting. We're creating tiers of truths. We're scaling our words.

We're trying to make his commands manageable. But that's the point of the whole Sermon on the Mount, right? This whole time that we've been walking through this together, Jesus says anger, it's judged like murder. Lust, it's judged like adultery.

He calls for radical fidelity in marriage and now a radical integrity in our words. Jesus is not

interested in lowering God's standards to make obedience livable. He's raising the bar to expose that we can't meet it.

As we go through, whether marriage vows or contracts, oaths of office, the Hippocratic, all of these different things. I mean, very few of us in this room can actually say, oh, I've never taken an oath. I have never sworn myself to.

No, we're all guilty before Jesus and before the radical integrity that God is calling us to. There is no loophole. Jesus wants a world.

He wants a kingdom. He wants a people of radical truth-telling. Jesus wants to create a world of radical truth-telling.

Is that a world that you want to live in? Do you want to live in a world of radical integrity? See, before we ever ask the question of whether or not we are truth-tellers, whether or not we have lived up to Christ's standards of integrity, I need us to ask the question, is that what we want? Not just do we want to be radical truth-tellers, but do we want to live in a world of radical truth-telling? Do you want to live in a world where nothing stays hidden? Do you want to live in a world where your authentic self, good or bad, is fully known? Where everyone's authentic self is fully known? Because Jesus says that that is what the kingdom of God is. It is that kind of world where nothing stays in the shadows. Everything that is hidden is brought into the light.

Everything that is whispered is proclaimed from the rooftops. And so if we don't want the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, then we don't actually want the kingdom that Jesus is building. And if we don't want a kingdom that is built upon Christ's character, then we don't actually want Jesus.

We might want salvation. We might want the forgiveness of our sins. We may want peace after we die.

But we don't actually want the kingdom of God because we don't actually want radical honesty. That feels too vulnerable, doesn't it? That feels terrifying. Deep down, the reason we don't want a world of radical truth-telling is because we don't believe that we can be fully, truly, authentically known and still be accepted.

And that's true. There is no way that anyone can be truly, authentically, completely known by this world and still be accepted. And so we lie.

We manipulate the truth. We hide. Like Adam and Eve, we cover ourselves, only allowing people to see what we want them to see.

We put our best foot forward on social media. We hide who we really are, and we feel safe, but we will never be known. And if we are never known, then we can never be truly loved.

Even those who love us, when they don't fully know us, how deep can their love go when we're

holding them at arm's length? We don't believe that we can be truly known and truly accepted. We don't believe that we can be truly known and still be truly loved. And this is where we need not just Jesus' words about the kingdom, but we need Jesus to forgive us and heal us and bring us into the kingdom.

This is the good news of the gospel, because in Christ, here's the truth, in Jesus, you are fully known. There is nothing hidden from the one Revelation describes, whose eyes are like a flame of fire piercing through the darkness. You are truly known.

Every thought, every desire, every intention of your heart, every action throughout past and throughout your entire life, Christ sees. He knows. That thing that you wish that you didn't know about yourself, that thing that you hide from others and pray to God that no one will ever find out, Jesus sees that.

And yet, He sees you fully, and He loves you completely. You are fully known, and you are fully loved. You are fully exposed, and you are fully accepted, not because your words have been truthful, but because Jesus has been faithful on your behalf.

Jesus is the Word of God made flesh. God cannot lie, and therefore Jesus, as the Word of God, is the faithful and true witness. Scripture says that Christ is the Amen.

He is the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. And what did the world do to the one who only told the truth? They slandered Him. They condemned Him.

They lied about Him. They crucified Him. Jesus ultimately knows what it's like to tell the truth and not be believed.

And on the cross, He bore the judgment that we deserve for our lies, for manipulating the truth, for our hiding, and for our reputation management. Jesus died for the very reason that we feel the need to hide. That thing that we don't want to be found out for, that thing that you don't even like thinking about because you don't like remembering that that is or was true of you at some point in your life.

Jesus died to set you free from the guilt and the shame of that thing. And when He rose from the grave, His resurrection is the vindication not only that He was truth, that He was telling the truth, but in His resurrection, He has guaranteed that all who believe in Him through faith not only have their sins covered, but their sins will not keep them from life in the kingdom. The cross is God's oath to us.

God can make oaths because God can't lie. And the cross is His oath, not manipulating us with an oath, but the cross is the visible proof that He has promised to save sinners. It is His visible proof, His assurance made with His own blood, that God saves liars like us.

God saves those who manipulate the truth like us. And so here's what that means. If you are fully known and fully loved, and everything that you have ever done and been tempted to lie

about, if Christ truly has died for that thing, set you free from the penalty of that thing, set you free from the shame of that thing, then you can tell the truth.

You can be a radical truth teller because you have nothing to lose. The gospel levels the playing field. It says all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God, and all through faith have been saved by the one who is truly trustworthy.

And so if we're all on the same playing field, then we can tell the truth about our lives, knowing that we've been accepted by God, and that all of us are in the same place, deserving of condemnation and yet forgiven by the blood of Christ. And that grace is the only thing that makes honesty safe. That grace is the only thing that allows humanity, which has been tempted to hide from the beginning, it's the only thing that allows us to step into the light and know that we'll be accepted, know that we'll be loved.

There may be consequences in this life, but ultimately, our eternity is sealed through faith in Christ. And so this grace not only forms honest people, but it forms an honest community, a trusted people. There was a group of people, a sect of Judaism called the Essenes in the first century.

They lived in Qumran down by the Dead Sea. They were the community that created what we now know today as the Dead Sea Scrolls. And they were a community of people who banished oaths from among the community.

They took one oath to get into the community. And then after that point on, oaths were no longer allowed in the community because they believed if someone's word is not believed without an oath, he is condemned already. And so Josephus, the Jewish historian, talks about this community as kind of being weird and extreme, but trustworthy.

Imagine that being said of the church. People may say, I disagree with their theology, but imagine how different things would be if people in the world thought about the church, thought about Jesus followers and said, you know what? I don't necessarily agree with what they believe, but you can take their word to the bank. I don't necessarily believe what they believe, but they are a trustworthy and true people.

And it is heartbreaking that that's not the way we're seen. It's not theoretical. It's not just because they have something against us.

It's because the church has failed to tell the truth at times. There's been abuse and scandals and manipulation and leaders feeding on the sheep instead of feeding the sheep. And it makes sense why the world struggles to believe our testimony about Jesus.

If they can't believe anything else we talk about. If we're not trustworthy individuals, they're not going to believe us when we talk about Jesus, just because we're talking about Jesus. Jesus is forming a different kind of people.

People who don't need oaths in order to sound honest. A people whose everyday words can be trusted. A people whose yes means yes, period.

And whose no means no, without exception. A people who are so confident in grace that we have nothing to hide. Now listen, maybe some of you here and you're feeling the weight of living the lie.

Maybe it's something specific that nobody else knows. Maybe it's just a general lie. You've gotten very good at managing perception.

Very good at just saying enough. Saying the right things and appearing transparent without actually being honest. If you're here and you're living that lie, chances are you're exhausted.

It is really difficult to keep up appearances when you're hiding something that makes you feel vulnerable. And so Jesus is inviting you into, he's inviting you to step into the light today. Not to shame you, but to free you.

He's inviting you to repent of the dishonesty, repent of the lie, to bring it into the light, to name it, to confess it. Because you know that protecting that lie is no longer protecting you. It's exhausting.

And Jesus does not want to crush you in the truth. He wants to heal you with truth. He already sees that thing.

He's already shed his blood for that thing that you are trying to hide. You don't need to manage your image before Christ. You can step into the light and find mercy.

And for some of you today you need to acknowledge before the Lord, maybe before a brother or sister in Christ. Acknowledge who you really are and experience the grace of Jesus for every part of your life. Not just the parts that feel presentable.

For others in the room, maybe you're carrying deep wounds because you've been lied to. Promises have been broken and stories have been manipulated. The truth has been twisted and trust has been shattered.

And when that trust fractures, it's totally obvious and normal for there to be anger and grief. Today you need to know and remember that Jesus knows what it's like to be slandered. Jesus knows what it's like to be lied to, to be betrayed with a kiss.

They came to arrest him. Judas told the soldiers, the one I kiss is the man. Arrest him.

And Jesus receives this demonstration of affection. And there was a knife in his back. He knows what it means to be betrayed.

He knows what it means to tell the truth and to be condemned by it. You're not crazy for feeling the pain, but you're also not alone in it. We have an advocate before the Father.

We have the one who does know the truth about us and tells the truth about us. Jesus ultimately tells the truth about you to his Father. And that truth is, I have died to save them.

I love them. They're mine. Jesus is your advocate.

He is your vindicator. And there is nothing that has been done in the darkness that will not be brought into the light. Not one lie will be able to survive the kingdom of God.

You don't have to carry the weight of seeking your own vengeance. You can entrust yourself to Jesus today and trust that truth will prevail. And third, there are those in the room whose testimony has not been received.

You know the frustration and that feeling of helplessness when you're not believed. You told the truth. You tried to explain.

You swore an oath and it didn't matter. Jesus knows that feeling of powerlessness as well. They didn't believe him.

They mocked him. They dismissed him. They called him a blasphemer and a liar.

And he trusted himself to the one he knew would judge justly. And so if you're walking through that kind of pain, telling the truth and not being believed, hear this. Your vindication is not in winning an argument.

Your vindication is the resurrection of Jesus. Knowing that one day all will be brought into the light. And so you can release your need to prove yourself.

God sees you. He knows you. He loves you.

He grieves with you. He will never leave you. Never forsake you.

This is the kingdom of God that he is building. It's a world of truth where there are, there's nothing hidden. There's nothing in the shadows.

And that would be terrifying for liars like us, if it were not for the cross, because it would mean exposure without mercy. But the king has shed his blood for liars like us. And that changes everything.

The cross is not only forgiveness. It's God's oath. It's God's covenant declaration.

He knows you completely. That he has sworn in his blood to love you completely. And that he will never leave you.

Never forsake you. That is a God that we can be honest with. Because we know we're already accepted.

Amen. Amen. Father, we thank you for your word.

And Lord, we thank you that you see us. Lord, you know us as we are. You know our thoughts and intentions of our heart, God.

You know the things that we wish we didn't know about ourselves. And yet when we try to hide those things away, Lord, you bring them into the light, not to shame us, but to heal us. And so Holy Spirit, come.

And would you do that healing work in our lives? Or would you do that healing work in our minds and our hearts right now, as we come boldly before the throne of grace, Lord? Would we lay down everything that is hidden and walk away from this place, Lord? No longer trying to curate our image, but to walk wholly and completely, trusting the identity that you have given us, which is your beloved sons and daughters. That set us free today, that fill us with your spirit. That we would live as a people of radical integrity.

That we would live as a people testifying ultimately to the truthfulness of our God. Lord, would you do this among us for your glory, for the good of your people? In Jesus' name, amen.